analysis PART 9

a decade he exhibited Indian and foreign films. The films made by Phalke fired Sampat's imagination and he decided to get into film production. The commercial success of **Lanka Dahan** must have confirmed his faith in the new medium and he joined Patankar.

THE BEGINNING OF BOLLYWOOD!

Given the fact that the city had played a pivotal role in the early days of cinema it would have been nothing short of surprising had Bombay not grown into one of the major centres of film production in India. As we have seen earlier, Bombay had played host to the first ever cinema show at the Watson Hotel in 1896. Also it had given sustenance to film-makers from Harishchandra Bhatawdekar to Dadasaheb Phalke – though the latter had chosen to migrate to the quiet of his native city of Nasik. By 1917 Dadasaheb Phalke, had proved that the novelty of the moving picture could be the basis of big business. The fantastic success of **Lanka Dahan** had opened every businessman's eyes to the potential of the new medium.

By the end of the second decade of the 20th century, Bombay had already been established as the commercial capital of India. The once marshy mosquito-infested seven islands where everyone dreaded a posting had grown into a city of fortune and wish fulfillment. It was natural, therefore, for the new business of cinema to take root in this fertile soil. It was not that the city was foresaken after Dadasaheb Phalke's departure to Nasik after the making of **Raja Harishchandra**. His contemporary, Shri Nath Patankar, had stayed back to continue making movies under the banner of Patankar Friends and Union.

The financing partner of this Union was Seth Dwarkadas Narayandas

– Dwarkadas Narayandas Sampat.

– Sampat's Ghar Jamai.

Sampat who was destined to play a major role in the silent cinema of the city in the 1920s. When Patankar's four-part serial (in 32 reels), **The Exile Of Shree Rama**, proved to be unsuccessful, Dwarkadas Sampat suggested that they hire women to play the female lead. Differences of opinion led to a parting of ways and Sampat withdrew from the company to start his own independent banner with cinematographer-producer Maneklal Patel. The year was 1918 and the company was the Kohinoor Film Company, which was to produce a stupendous 98 feature films in the next 10 years.

Not much is known of Sampat's early life except that he was born on October 24, 1885. The first that we know of him is in 1904 when he purchased an Edison camera for a sum of Rs. 4000. He would photograph short films and show them free of charge to groups of 30 to 50 persons. It was more in the nature of a hobby than an actual business. For

The first venture of the duo was **Sheth Sagaisa** (1918), which was processed with the help of a kerosene lamp (as was the practice when electricity was rare). Naturally the end result was so bad that Sampat was repulsed by it. He then decided to set up a film laboratory at Lonavala where electricity was in abundant supply. He also became the first to purchase a Bell & Howell camera which was to become popular with Indian film-makers. Thus Patankar's aesthetics and Sampat's foresight and business acumen became a superb combination for their company.

The partnership broke over the matter of signing female artistes. The duo were planning **Kacha Devayani** and Sampat was keen on bringing two stage actresses from Calcutta – Usha and Gai – to play crucial roles in the film. The conservative Patankar thought that his partner (always known to be eccentric) was going too far. He probably thought that the orthodox Hindu society of those days would protest in no uncertain terms. That is when the partners decided to part company.

Maneklal Patel was a mere seven years younger than Sampat and had almost the same background. He had also started as an exhibitor of films and was thus attracted to production. He actually launched **Vishwamitra Menaka** (or **Shakuntala Janma**) way

back in 1918 with D. D. Dabke as cameraman, director and leading man and K. P. Bhave (who later turned director) as the leading lady. The film was amateurish but it was enough to give Maneklal Patel a taste of film-making. He was thus the ideal foil for Dwarkadas Sampat who was equally bold and raring to go.

While the Kohinoor Film Company was being set up and its first film was being planned, another bright young film-maker rose on the Indian horizon. Unfortunately, the bright star was going to prove to be a comet which would soon fizzle out. This was the young Suchet Singh who had trained in Hollywood (reputedly under Chaplin for some time) and had now returned to India with an impressive B.C.S., C.P.A. to his name. He started his business in India under the banner of the Oriental Film Manufacturing Company.

The first film that he decided to make was the Kalidasa classic **Shakuntala** with an American actress (Dorothy Kingdom) playing the central role of

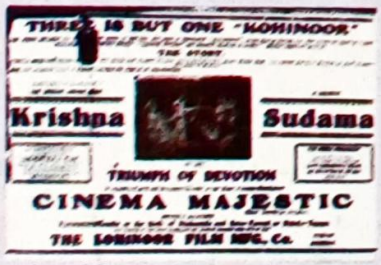
– Suchet Singh's Shakuntala (1920).

Shakuntala opposite Sampson. Suchet Singh himself termed this as "the unique interpretation of an Oriental character by an Occidental star". The film was photographed by Kingdom's husband Baron von Rayvon and also starred Gauhar Jaan and Kanjibhai Rathod (later to become a director in his own right). The film was to be made at a fabulous investment and would take months.

All this hype went against the film for when it was released Patankar had made another version of the same story called **The Fateful Ring**, starring the local girl Tara Koregaonkar in the central role. Though Suchet Singh claimed his version to be the superior one, the audience was divided between the two films with a slight bent towards Patankar's film which was advertised as the **swadeshi** version strictly in accordance with the original drama. Obviously the foreign returned Singh had taken a few liberties with the Kalidasa play, always a sensitive matter in orthodox India.

Not to be defeated Singh set about making three more features in the same year; **Narsinh Mehta**, **Mrichchkatika** and **Rama Aur Maya** (starring Gauhar Jaan). He also made a topical and a short two-reeler starring one Pagal and promoted as the Indian Chaplin. However, none of these films did too well at the box office. The "foreign" stamp which was to act in its favour seems to have gone against it. By early the following year the films were put up for sale but much before that it was announced that Suchet Singh had passed away in an accident bringing the whole episode to a premature close.

While Suchet Singh was busy creating a diversionary sensation with the hype surrounding his films, Dwarkadas Sampat and Maneklal Patel were gearing up for more shocks and surprises. They had already released the first two films under the Kohinoor banner, namely, **Sati Parvati** and **Shri Krishna Sudama**, both directed by Vishnupant Divekar, with the camera



– An ad for Krishna Sudama (1920).

cranked by A. P. Karandikar (both former associates of Patankar). The year 1921 also started sedately with one release from Divekar and a few more from the newly inducted Kanjibhai Rathod.

Kanjibhai Rathod had started his career in films, with the ill-fated Suchet Singh, first as a still photographer and then as the lead player of **Narsinh Mehta**. Sampat saw in him the makings of a director and gave him several prestigious assignments. The first flutter he created was by having a nude scene in **Sati Anasuya** (1921), a fact which was ignored by the censors (censorship had been introduced from 1918) since "sex among the natives" probably did not matter much to them. However, his next film **Bhakta Vidur**, directed by Rathod starring the boss himself as Vidur, created a sensation. The film also starred Maneklal Patel and Homi Master, who was to make a name as a director of American style crime movies.

When **Bhakta Vidur** was released in 1922 the audience (and then the ruling British) could not help noticing that the lead character looked suspiciously like Mahatma Gandhi. Sampat and Rathod had used the old trick of giving a mythological garb to a very contemporary emotion: the fall of the Kaurava empire could very well refer to another empire. The film also showed a **charkha** (Gandhi's favoured symbol of Swaraj) and was referred to it as the 'wheel of fortune'. The British instantly banned the film but it had a long enough run to establish Kohinoor as a company to watch out for.

– Homi Master & Dwarkadas Sampat in Bhakta Vidur.

As a footnote to the episode one can add that **Bhakta Vidur** was re-released in 1922 as **Dharma Vijay**, probably in a much-truncated form. The films that the company made in the next two years were the usual mythologicals with Kanjibhai Rathod as the main director. Divekar and Karandikar had left to join the Bharat Film Company launched by a disgusted Vaman Shridhar Apte. Rathod was also fated to leave Kohinoor in 1923 to join the Rajkot-based Saurashtra Film Company started by the Patani Brothers. The company was to fold up two years later and Rathod would return to Bombay to continue his career with Maneklal Patel who would leave Kohinoor soon after a big fire had destroyed the studio in 1923.

Nineteen twenty-three would prove to

be a watershed year for Sampat. The tragedy of the fire would further spur him on to greater heights. With the cooperation of a few of his faithful staff who stayed back with him and some help from Eastman Kodak, Sampat put the company on its feet. This began to attract new talent, and among it a bright young actor-director named Homi Master. Master used the basic material provided by a true-life murder of a young girl and an old man which had created a sensation in Bombay and turned it into a film. It detailed the exploits of a fictional criminal named **Kala Naag** (1924).

The film was so popular that it inspired a sequel a few years later, **The Return Of Kala Naag** (1927), once again directed by Homi Master. The success of **...Kala Naag** set the tone for the remaining Master and Kohinoor films and they met with varying degrees of success. Another success directed by Master was **Fankado Fituri** also called **Handsome Blackguard** (1925) which was described as "a charming heiress, a good-looking but villainous doctor, a timid lover, a crafty detective, a singing girl". Another Kohinoor product, directed by Mohan Bhavnani, **Telephone Girl** (1926), was advertised as "Night Clubs, Turkish Baths ... College life of girls".

Though the company could not face the challenges of the talkie era and folded up, there is no denying that Dwarkadas Sampat's greatest achievement was that he brought professionalism to an industry which functioned in an ad hoc manner. He was the first to finance a film laboratory which ran on electricity. He was the first to visualise the need to bring in actresses to play female roles. He was also the first to introduce a professional director like Kanjibhai Rathod going against the custom of those days to direct one's own films. He was also the first person to introduce the concept of independent distribution agents when he sold the distribution rights of his films to Bachchubhai Bhagubhai in 1925. Thus began the era of specialisation in the Indian film industry.

Sampat was always willing to give the professional a chance and thus ended playing godfather to not only a whole host of directors from Kanjibhai Rathod to Homi Master, Nandlal Jaswantlal, V. M. Vyas, Mohan Bhavnani and the fabled Chandulal Shah but also the first successful scenarist Mohanlal Dave. He gave the industry such actresses like Sulochana Zubeida (who was to play the lead in the first Indian talkie **Alam Ara**) and her mother Fatima (who was to later turn producer-director in her own right). He was also the first to build a major open air studio at the junction of Naigaum Cross Road and Dadar Main Road (now the Dadasaheb Phalke Road at Dadar East). Thus, in a sense Dwarkadas Sampat became the father of the Bombay film industry as we know it today.

One of the actresses Sampat had signed in his films was Fatima Begum, wife of the Nawab of Sachien. She had had a brilliant career on the Urdu stage and had worked with the Star Film Company and Royal Art Studios. Her daughters Sultana and Zubeida were established stars and she would soon introduce her youngest daughter Shahzadi in the talkie era. She was a dynamic woman who, by 1925, had launched her own company Victoria Fatima Film Corporation and turned producer-director – the first Indian woman to do so. In the next four years she would make six feature films, viz., **Bulbule Paristan** (1926), **Goddess Of Love** (1927), **Heer Ranjah** and **Chandravali** (1928), **Milan Dinar** and **Shakuntala** (1929).

Maneklal Patel left Dwarkadas Sampat soon after the fire in 1923, four years and two dozen films later. Though film production was very much on his mind, Patel first set up a film laboratory under the banner of Shree Krishna Laboratories, a name which probably was inspired from his own pen-name, Krishna Kumar. The laboratory itself was in response to the oft-asked industry question about what should be done with the prints that had become unfit for screening? Always the technical man, Patel came up with the idea of making new dupe prints. The Krishna Film Company, which came later, was thus an offshoot of the laboratory.

The first film the new company made was **Chandrakant** a.k.a **Krishna Kumar** (1925), starring Gulab and Gangaram, and directed by Harshadrai Mehta. Mehta had been a junior partner with Sampat and had left Kohinoor to join Patel. Other films followed but the company received a boost only when Kanjibhai Rathod returned from Rajkot to join as director. Unlike others Sampat Patel did not rely on just one writer (Mohanlal Dave, who had by then become a one-man writing industry) but bought the works of important Gujarati writers and brought them to the screen. Among them were Girijashanker Joshi, Narayan Thakkar and even K. M. Munshi, who provided stories for two of Krishna's most important films, **Jai Somnath** and **Whose Fault** (both 1929).

In spite of his many peccadilloes (many of which even took him to court), Rathod along with Harshadrai Mehta were still the main directors for Krishna Pictures. It was Mehta who directed **Janjirne Jankare** (1927), whose excellent technique was often

– A scene from Hatim Tai (1929).

cited as India's answer to Hollywood. The company's most famous production, however, was the four-part serial **Hatim Tai** (1929), starring Zubeida (a Kohinoor star) and directed by Profulla Ghosh. With the advent of the talkies the company changed to Krishnatone and even produced five talkies with Rathod as director but it could not survive the transition.

– The poster of Krishna Pictures' Hatim Tai (1929).

Krishna Film Company closed down in 1935 following litigation. Its last films was **Fashionable India** (1935), starring an actor named O. K. Dar who later became famous as Jeevan. Between 1925 and 1935 the company made a total of 66 feature films, 44 of them silent. It was the most productive of the splinter groups that emerged from Kohinoor, which ended up with a tally of 98 films – all of which were silent.

— SANJIT NARWEKAR